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FM AMEMBASSY AMMAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5639
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001730

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/26/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: HOW JORDANIAN CIVIL SOCIETY DROPPED THE BALL ON
THE ASSOCIATIONS LAW

REF: A. AMMAN 1620
[1](#)B. AMMAN 1576
[1](#)C. AMMAN 1054
[1](#)D. AMMAN 920
[1](#)E. AMMAN 450

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Lawrence Mandel
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Despite a promising start for the NGO coalition which worked with Jordan's government to amend the overly restrictive Law on Associations, the group effectively dissolved at the critical moment that the amendments reached parliament. Egos and personality conflicts of local NGO leaders were the main reason behind civil society's failure. As a result, the coalition's lobbying efforts in parliament were disorganized and ineffective. Dispirited and wary of the amended law's practical implications, many NGOs are considering a change to for-profit status to avoid new regulatory burdens. Others are thinking of shutting their organizations down. The entire episode is indicative of civil society's lack of capacity and inability to serve as a major agent of change in Jordan. End Summary.

Things Fall Apart

[1](#)2. (C) In July 2008, Jordan's parliament passed a Law on Associations that placed excessive regulatory burdens on civil society organizations. One month after its passage, King Abdullah tasked PM Nader Dahabi's government with the creation of an amendment package that would allay the concerns of international donor countries and Jordanian NGOs.

Encouraged by the King's engagement on the issue, representatives of prominent NGOs formed a coalition to develop and lobby for effective amendments to the 2008 law. Over the next several months, they met behind the scenes with government ministers to develop a common approach. Civil society was asked to prepare a list of suggested changes, most of which were eventually incorporated into the government's final draft of the amendments. Those amendments were submitted to parliament in June.

[1](#)3. (C) Despite the initially positive signs of cooperation between civil society and the government on the Law on Associations, the NGO coalition quickly dissolved in the late spring and early summer of 2009. In the run-up to parliament's extraordinary session, the government (and in particular Minister of Social Development Hala Lattouf) actively lobbied MPs for passage of the law (Ref C). NGOs, on the other hand, had only a marginal presence in the halls of parliament, meeting primarily with MPs who already supported their views. They also failed to muster a visible public relations campaign to shape the issue in the minds of parliamentarians and the public. Civil society representatives were completely absent on the day parliament debated the law and finally voted on it. Following some significant changes to the amendment package on the floor of parliament, the coalition has not sent out a single press release. What happened to the civil society coalition, and

why was it unwilling or unable to defend the basic interests of Jordanian NGOs?

Personality Conflicts Take A Toll

¶4. (C) Personality conflicts were at the heart of civil society's ultimate inability to unite around the amendments. When they were tasked directly by the government with suggesting concrete amendments to the law, civil society leaders were able to put aside their pre-existing differences and work together. Once that external motivation ended, however, the egos of many coalition members crept in, making it difficult for them to focus on the ultimate goal of the law's passage.

¶5. (C) Several members of the coalition suggested that the group be institutionalized in order to effectively advance their agenda in parliament. The group met at the Dead Sea in April 2009 to create an action plan for the amendments and form a strategy for future coalition lobbying efforts. Rather than marking the start of a long-term, unified civil society grouping, the Dead Sea meeting proved to be its undoing. Disputes arose about who would lead the group and what its goals would be. Several NGO leaders were jockeying for that position in the hopes that their organization would be seen as the de facto "leader" of civil society in Jordan. When none of the NGOs were willing to cede the leadership function to any of the others who were present, it quickly became clear that the coalition was effectively dead.

¶6. (C) Contacts who were at the meeting say that personal

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and professional relations between members of the coalition deteriorated further after the meeting. One NGO leader confessed, "we were kind of lost. We had no shared vision." Others complained that group was disorganized and "left in a big muddle." Several began refusing to meet with coalition members. In the weeks after the Dead Sea meeting, the remaining members of the coalition failed to agree even on a time for their next strategy session.

Lobbying Ineffective and Disorganized

¶7. (C) While some began to meet individually with MPs about the Associations Law, their efforts were haphazard and ultimately ineffective (Ref D). One NGO leader managed to get a fifteen-minute audience with Lower House Speaker Abdulhadi Al-Majali, but the Speaker was dismissive and unwilling to give the concerns of civil society a full hearing. Others met with MPs who already supported their views, failing to concentrate on opponents of the amendments.

¶8. (C) Many of our contacts in the coalition were further incensed by a late push by the quasi-governmental National Center for Human Rights (NCHR) to spearhead lobbying for the amendments in parliament. NCHR held several workshops in May and June which aimed to form a new NGO coalition under the center's aegis to approach parliament in a unified fashion. Members of the previous coalition refused to join, however, and the move merely served to demonstrate to some that NCHR is too close to conservatives in Jordan's government.

Voting With Their Feet

¶9. (C) Wary of the amended law and unwilling to submit to its burdensome legal requirements, many of our contacts in the NGO sector are planning to transform their organizations into for-profit companies. Some prominent civil society leaders had already taken this precaution years ago and now others are quickly following suit. The move is happening quietly in the hopes that Jordan's government will fail to notice. None of the NGOs who are pursuing the change are

doing so in order to truly adopt a for-profit model -- they see it as an administrative maneuver that will allow them to operate free from creeping government oversight.

¶10. (C) There are consequences to the transition from non-profit to for-profit status. Internal regulations of the European Union prevent it from directing aid money to for-profit institutions. Several of the organizations who are changing their status (particularly those who shun USG assistance for political reasons) rely heavily on EU money. Some have told us that they will seek an exception to the rule from the EU delegation in Amman. Similar regulations exist for some direct USAID grants under USD 100,000, but will not impact most Jordanian NGOs who receive money through implementing partners.

¶11. (C) At least one member of the NGO coalition confided to us that she is thinking about permanently closing her organization following the law's passage. She will wait to see how the regulatory process pans out, but has taken recent events as a clear signal that the government will remain suspicious of civil society. The new restrictions on foreign funding, coupled with the global economic downturn, mean that her organization will find it ever more difficult to maintain a positive cash flow.

Comment

¶12. (C) The inability of Jordanian civil society to unify and defend its own interests is indicative of its general lack of capacity and feeble political position. While there is some degree of remorse and introspection among our civil society interlocutors, many still fail to realize that their failure to follow through will dampen the prospect for true and meaningful reform in the years to come. After pursuing essentially the same legislative battle two times in as many years, both the government and civil society have little political will remaining to confront conservatives in parliament again. Transfers to for-profit status are a short-term fix for those who are willing to make the change, but those who choose to remain as non-profits face an ever harder road ahead.

Mandel